

NUMBERS

Lesson 21 - Chapters 16, 17, and 18 Continued

In our last lesson we began a 3-chapter block of Scripture in Numbers that seeks to make clear to all that the Priesthood is central to Israel's relationship with Yehoveh. And that the hierarchy of holiness that God set up, first with Levi being separated away from Israel for special holiness as His servants, and second with the Levites themselves being divided into 2 groups called Levites and Priests, was unchangeable. What the Lord establishes, man does not change. Who the Lord decides is to be His priest's mankind cannot revise and certainly cannot abolish.

In the story that began in Numbers 16 we find a general condition of upset and unrest among the people of Israel. They are demoralized by the faithless and cowardly report from 10 of the 12 scouts and Israel's leadership's subsequent decision to avoid the conquest of Canaan, their Promised Land.

The people were emotionally unstable and wanted change; new leadership seemed to them like a good place to start. It's one thing for men to occasionally seek to remove one set of leaders and replace them with another; it's quite another for men to try to usurp God's will as was the case with this rebellion.

Korah, a Levite who is dissatisfied that the line of Aaron (a family line who is also from the tribe of Levi, but from a different clan than his own) is the only family line that can be appointed as highly prestigious Priests. Even though the entire tribe of Levi is separated from Israel for special holiness and service to YHWH, the Priests have been given an even greater degree of sanctification than the other Levites with the High Priest (currently Aaron) being given the highest degree of holiness possible for any Hebrew (save for Moses). Korah is jealous and disputes this; he challenges Aaron's position and wants it for himself and wants the priesthood to be more evenly distributed among other Levite clans. This was typical tribal society behavior where tribes, and clans within tribes, were in a never-ending cycle of vying among themselves for dominance, status and power.

But the majority of the tribe of Levi (those who were NOT of Aaron's clan) were not the only ones who had a serious axe to grind; we found that 2 clan leaders of the tribe of Reuben were challenging Moses for his job as the ultimate leader and authority over all Israel. The founder of the tribe of Reuben (Reuben) had been dead for at least 300 years, so what Numbers 16 is referring to are his descendants. Reuben, the firstborn son of Jacob, expected that he (and therefore his future tribe) would become the dominant tribe among the 12 tribes of Israel, as he also fully expected to have been awarded the leadership role over Israel by means of his

birthright as the first son born to Jacob and thus receiving the customary blessings of the Firstborn from his father. But Jacob rejected Reuben and refused to give him the Firstborn blessing, and therefore, the authority of the firstborn; this humiliating act would impact Reuben's family (and eventual tribe) in a negative way from that moment forward. Instead Jacob split the provisions of the firstborn blessing that should have gone to Reuben, giving the right of leadership of the nation of Israel to Judah, and the right to inherit the largest portion of wealth to Joseph. Reuben's descendants (even after all this time) had neither accepted this humiliation nor gotten over the loss of leadership status they felt should always have been theirs. As a result, at this moment we find 2 tribal leaders of Reuben (Datan and Aviram) challenging Moses' position as leader of Israel; they wanted the job. Along with Korah, Datan, and Aviram were 250 leaders of other Israelite tribes who also wished to remove Moses and Aaron from their God-established positions, and to take over the leadership of the nation of Israel for themselves.

Moses' solution was to let God handle it by means of a public demonstration: each of these rebel leaders were to put hot coals onto a fire pan (also called a censor), lay incense on top of it, and take the smoking mixture to the entry to the Tent of Meeting. Then God would in some undefined way settle the matter as to who would be those privileged few (Priests) that have access to the inner chambers of the sacred Tent, and who would have control over Israel.

Let's re-read from Numbers 16:16 to the end of the chapter to better recall what we read last week.

RE-READ NUMBERS 16:16 - 35

Korah and the 250 leaders and apparently some amount of the others (referred to as the whole community, those who sided with the rebels) do as instructed and show up at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting with their fire pans. Without doubt, this was NOT at the door that was the entrance to the Sanctuary Tent itself, but rather the gate into the Tabernacle Courtyard, that everyone gathered.

Then the Presence of God (*kavod*, glory) appeared before everyone and the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron and tells them to stand aside, that He is going to annihilate everyone who is involved. Now it must be that only Moses and Aaron heard Yehoveh speak or else certainly all these men would have turned pale and run for their lives. And as had happened in the past, the Mediator of Israel falls on his face and begs for mercy for these very men whose goal it was to do away with Moses and Aaron in a coup. Further, in verse 22, Moses asks, " would you send your wrath on an entire community because one man sinned?"

Obviously this one man was Korah, the instigator of this whole mess. At least in Moses' view it was Korah who apparently stirred up Datan, and Aviram, who then helped Korah to stir up the others. But understand what is being discussed here: the topic is collective punishment. Obviously not each man is guilty in exactly the same way as the others, nor is the level of participation universally equal among them all. Moses is both acknowledging and questioning this principle of collective punishment, and whether God is serious about acting on that principle in this case.

Now this can all get a little confusing because the Bible keeps using the word "community" over and over but it is actually each time referring to a somewhat different group of people. It's not totally unlike us pointing to a group and saying "these people", and then pointing to a part of that same group and saying "these people". The Hebrew term **ha-edah**, which is what is being translated here into the word community, is a rather all-encompassing and flexible term that is used to refer to most any assembly of people when they are of a common race, or performing a common action, or agreeing on a common decision. So the community that showed up at the Tent of Meeting with the rebels was those who sided with the rebel leaders. When the Presence of the Lord appeared to the whole community (in Hebrew **kol ha-edah**) it was that everyone in the nation of Israel could see His presence. When God told Moses to stand back from this community because He was going to destroy them it was referring to those rebels and their backers. When Moses asked God if He would destroy the **kol edah**.....the WHOLE community.....because of one man's sin, this was referring to all of Israel again.

When we get to verse 26 and Moses tells the community to stand away from the tents of the wicked men, the reference to community in this case was to all those who did NOT stand with the rebels. And this is emphasized when Moses tells the innocent to disassociate themselves from the rebels, not to even touch any item that belongs to them, lest they wind up being collateral damage when the guilty get punished.

We find this principle of separation woven throughout the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments. Believers must be separated from non-Believers. Clean from unclean. Sinners from the saved. Sheep from the goats. Lot had to be separated from the pagans of Sodom or he would be collateral damage. The trick is to discern how and how much God's righteous are to separate from the unrighteous. The Essenes of Yeshua's day took that principle to one extreme and created their own separate colonies with stringent rules of membership; they even established their headquarters out in the wilderness far away from everyone else at a place today called Qumran. Messiah, by the way, did not approve of this extreme kind of separation and said so. On the other hand as Believers we are directly told in the Bible not to associate with murders, thieves, and those who do not belong to the Lord. We are to be in this world just not OF this world.

Notice that we find several things going on at once in this episode. First, it was that ONLY Korah and the 250 leaders and their cohorts who showed up at the Tent of Meeting for this demonstration test involving the fire pans and incense. Recall that Datan and Aviram refused to come to this event when Moses summoned them. And since they were in essence saying that it should be they and not Moses running the show, it's easy to picture why they refused to respond when Moses sent for them: they were sending a message that they did not accept Moses' authority and neither should anyone else.

So if you can't bring Mohammed to the Mountain you bring the Mountain to Mohammed; verse 25 says "Moses rose" and went to the tents of Datan and Aviram with the elders of Israel (elders means the official representatives of the people of Israel) going along with Moses, leaving from the Eastern entrance into the Tabernacle Courtyard and venturing to the southern side of the encampment where Datan and Aviram's tribe camped. It's important to remember

that the tribe of Levi camped adjacent to the tribe of Reuben, so they formed a kind of neighborhood.

When Moses showed up at the tents of Datan and Aviram they came out to confront him; Moses pronounces judgment upon them. He says, 'if you live to a normal lifespan, and then die as any man does', then Moses was acting on his accord and it was NOT Yehoveh who was ordering him to do all this. In other words if God doesn't do something spectacular to them then indeed they must have been correct all along: Moses was not the legitimate leader of Israel.

On the other hand, Moses says that if the ground opens up and swallows you then you were wrong and death is your punishment. Well, no sooner had Moses finished speaking the last syllable did the ground suddenly and violently split open beneath the tents of Datan and Aviram and those surrounding them who sided with them, and they all fell into the deep crevice and perished. The dead included the family of Korah and all those among his clan who sided with him; women, children, everybody. Even their tents and their material possessions fell into the enormous split in the earth. In other words every last vestige of these rebels' lives, every evidence that they had ever existed, was wiped out at the hand of God in a moment of His wrath.

And all the Israelites who saw what happened (presumably the innocent ones) fled in a panic for fear they'd fall into this gaping crevice.

The last verse of the chapter then changes location; we're taken back from the south side of the encampment where Moses had walked, to the east side and to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. There Korah and the 250 men who had showed up with their unauthorized fire pans to challenge God's established hierarchy; men who had no business or sufficient status to even come near to God were burned alive by fire coming from God's own presence. If this isn't a good picture of Hell, the Lake of Fire, and the ultimate punishment of the unrighteous I don't know what is.

The rebels, their families, and everything they owned were purged from Israel because they had become unclean in God's sight. Recall that a few years earlier some other men had also offered "strange fire" to God and they suffered the same fate: Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron. But Nadav and Avihu held the proper status and had a right to offer incense to God; these rebellious men, just destroyed, did not. The problem was that Nadav and Avihu offered coals from something other than the Altar of Burnt Offering, which was the ONLY allowable place for those coals to come from. So the sin against God perpetrated by Korah, Datan, Aviram and the 250 men was even worse than what Nadav and Avihu had done. In the case of Nadav and Avihu only THEY suffered the divine wrath for they acted only on their own behalf; in the case of Korah, Datan, and Aviram, their entire immediate families as well as anyone who even agreed with what they were doing were destroyed.

Next it says that all the rebels went down to Sheol. Sheol was the place of the dead, the grave. It was seen as a place that lay below the surface of the ground. Was Sheol contemplated in that era in the same way that we currently do, as a place where Satan and his demon henchmen dwell? As Hell or Hades, a place of fire and eternal torment for lost souls? No it was

not. In fact they weren't at all clear what Sheol was other than it was the grave and in it some kind of afterlife existed. They weren't clear what happened to the physical body in Sheol, after death, other than normal decomposition. They weren't clear on what happened to the breath of existence that we usually call a soul, when they died. We'll find throughout Torah that the Israelites were very worried about what happened to them after death because Sheol was seen as **everyone's** destiny, not just for the wicked. But one of the worst things that could happen once in Sheol was that worms could eat up one's body. And often that is what was thought to be a divine punishment for those who had died in an unrighteous state.

Why this inordinate concern about what happened to their bodies after they were dead? First, they had no concept of heaven or going to live with God. Remember they thought as the Egyptians thought; and Egyptians spent their entire lives getting ready for their death. Their afterlife was predicated on preservation of the physical body hence the desire for embalming and a protected place for their corpse to remain after they died. So although Israel didn't practice the death cult or body preservation of the Egyptians per se, they did have in their minds the dilemma of just what DID happen to them after their death and what to do about it and how to prepare for it. The primary point of the punishment that is expressed in this story (by falling into the crevice and going down to Sheol) was that these people died at God's hand; or to sharpen that point a bit, they died prematurely as a consequence of their behavior. And dying before one's normal lifespan had been spent was seen as a terrible thing and was greatly feared.

Last week I told you that one of the main lessons we should take from this is that redemption cannot only be rejected in the first place; it can be given back at the will of the one who received it. Just as Korah, Datan, Aviram, and hundreds if not thousands of their followers had determined to choose their old lives in Egypt rather than remain in their redemption FROM Egypt that they had already received from God, so it is with we modern day Believers. Put the emphasis on **choose**; because all these rebels CHOSE to go with Israel when they left Egypt.....they certainly were not forced to go.....and these same rebels CHOSE to make for themselves new leaders who would take them BACK to Egypt. They CHOSE to give up their redemption. It works the same way for us. No one can take our redemption away from us, and there is no place we can go to where it becomes invalid. But.....just as we choose to **accept** our redemption, and we can choose to **let go of it**. And, tragically, some countless number of people already has chosen, and many more will choose, to go back to Egypt.

But even more tragically is what happens to us when we do refuse, or we give back, our redemption; and it is demonstrated in full living color here in Numbers 16. The consequence is that we are utterly and completely destroyed; there is no hope, there is no future. All that we had worked a lifetime to build becomes as nothing. And perhaps worse is that (particularly as male leaders of our families and congregations), we have the ability to lead others away from their redemption. We can influence the decisions of others. And, they can suffer the same fate we will because of our rebellion. A sobering thought, is it not?

Listen to John 15:

CJB John 15:1 "I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 Every branch which

is part of me but fails to bear fruit, he cuts off; and every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, so that it may bear more fruit. 3 Right now, because of the word which I have spoken to you, you are pruned. 4 Stay united with me, as I will with you- for just as the branch can't put forth fruit by itself apart from the vine, so you can't bear fruit apart from me. 5 "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who stay united with me, and I with them, are the ones who bear much fruit; because apart from me you can't do a thing. 6 Unless a person remains united with me, he is thrown away like a branch and dries up. Such branches are gathered and thrown into the fire, where they are burned up.

Every branch (Believer) that IS part of Jesus but fails to bear fruits is CUT-OFF. And what happens to those cut-off branches that were at one time part of Messiah? They are thrown away, dried up, and then thrown into the fire where they are burned up. Pretty clear.

But let me also show you another foundational God-principle that is demonstrated here and it is this: not everyone is permitted to approach God. In fact only the redeemed can come near to the Lord. But even more, only the redeemed that are declared HOLY on some greater level can come near the Lord. On so many occasions I have referenced Paul, John and others in the NT who allude to Believers being as "priests" to the Lord. And I think that this is both figurative and literal to some degree. We find here in Numbers that Yehoveh declares that ONLY Priests can come near to His presence. And even then that is to a degree and based on status. Regular Priests can come near to Him but only so near; it is ONLY the High Priest that is allowed to come closest to His glory but even that is limited to only 1 day per year.....Yom Kippur. Those who do attempt to approach God but who are not deemed BY GOD to be priests are destroyed, as were Korah and the rest of his bunch. Why? Because they were not authorized to be in His presence.

One of the MANY things that Salvation accomplishes is to give us authorized access to God. God, by means of our belief in Yeshua, Jesus our Messiah, authorizes us to come into a place that no others are allowed under any circumstance: near to Him. Notice the dynamic and hierarchy set up in Israel: Moses is the sole Mediator. There IS no access to God without going through Moses, the Mediator. Those who tried to replace the Mediator or determined to go around God's appointed Mediator weren't just rejected; they were destroyed with no further hope of reinstatement.

Our ONLY possible access to God is by means of Yeshua our Mediator. We must come to Yeshua **before** we can come near to God (No, I'm not forgetting that Yeshua IS God, but that's another inscrutable matter). It was Moses who anointed the original priests in God's name. It is Christ that must anoint us with the Holy Spirit, which acts as our official authorization to come near to God. But even then there is a limitation as to just how near to Him we are allowed in our present condition. Because even though He has given us new and clean spirits, these bodies are still made of corrupt material. Our minds still have evil inclinations. Therefore we are told of a time when we will get new bodies made of uncorrupted material and new minds that will no longer remember the former days; THEN we'll be able to get even nearer to the Father.

Now I can't tell you if the writers of the NT simply saw a direct correlation between the ability of

Levite priests to come near to God, and then with the advent of Jesus the **new** ability for common people (Hebrew or gentile) to come near to God by means of Christ and therefore from this understanding they drew an analogy that we disciples of Yeshua are "like priests" in that regard. Or it may be that God actually and literally views us as His "new" and transformed priesthood. All that is open to discussion.

But what I can tell you is that the pattern for HOW one is permitted to come near to the Lord was set up a long time ago, and the DETAILS of that pattern are explained, here, in the Torah.

Let's move on to Numbers 17.

READ NUMBERS 17: 1 - 15

Under the pile of charred human remains lay more than 200 copper fire pans belonging to those rebels who presumed to disregard God's requirement that only priests were allowed to offer incense to Him. But we have a problem; just as being removed from the Sanctuary grounds can defile holy items, common things that were not intended for sacred purposes can CONTRACT holiness by being offered to Yehoveh. It is very much like the principles of clean and unclean whereby uncleanness can be transmitted from one thing or person to another like a contagious virus.

So the Lord orders Moses to instruct Eleazar the priest to perform the rather unpleasant task of sifting through all those charred bodies and removing those melted fire pans that had become holy by means of being offered to God in His presence. Notice in verse 2 that the coals used in those rebels' fire pans had to be removed from the area (the area being the Tabernacle courtyard); this was because the coals were not taken from the great Altar of Burnt Offering (which was a requirement for offerings to the Lord that involved fire). These were common coals that each of the rebels had brought with them from the campfires of their own encampments. Therefore these coals were to be taken away from the holy area and disposed of.

But the fire pans that had contracted a measure of holiness that they were not authorized to have, had to be dealt with in another manner. The solution was to hammer them into a lid for the fire basket of the Altar. This served two purposes: 1) it served the practical purpose of keeping the banked coals of the Altar hot overnight; and 2) it served as a reminder to the people of what happens when an unauthorized person encroaches on the sacred area. So we see yet another pattern emerge: God often sets up ordinances and regulations as REMINDERS to His people to obey Him. Why were the people to wear Tzitzit? They were the direct result of the incident when the man gathered sticks for a fire on Shabbat, and paid the ultimate price: loss of BOTH his physical and his spiritual life. That man had failed to observe one of God's appointed times, and the Lord commanded Tzitzit as a visual aid to help others avoid the same fate.

As every Israelite would regularly have to come to the Tabernacle with their sacrificial offerings, they would see the lid for the Altar made of the fire pans of those rebels who were burned up for thinking so little of God's priesthood and remember what happened. It would

remind the people of what happens when mere men would presume to declare who or what is holy outside of what God declares.

But wouldn't you just know it: even with the stench of those smoldering bodies lingering in the air much of the community of Israel still didn't get it and so they set up a protest rally against Moses and Aaron. This would be absolutely hilarious if it were not so dangerously, and irreverently, fool hearty. They say to Moses and Aaron, "YOU have brought death upon God's people." Amazing. But as I have attempted to demonstrate on numerous occasions we must grasp this Israelite people was at this time more Egyptian in their thinking than they were Hebrew. All the Middle East believed in sorcerers and priests whose job was less a matter of SERVING their gods than it was figuring out how to **manipulate** those gods for their own purposes. It was the same in Egypt where it was believed that a good priest or magician could CAUSE one god or another to do his bidding. And that thought formed much of the basis of the Hebrew thinking about God in that era, as well. So even though the people well knew that Moses and Aaron hadn't personally set fire to those 250 leading men at the gate to the Tabernacle, nor had they themselves caused a great split in the earth to open and swallow up all those men and their families, they DID believe that Moses and Aaron had manipulated God to do it for them. You know, kind of like hiring a heavenly hit man. And sadly, another lesson was necessary.

Once more the people rebelled, and once more the presence of God appears and announces His intention to wipe out this large group of protestors. Was God's plan to annihilate ALL Israel? No; just the rather large contingent of those who felt that it had been unjust of YHWH to destroy the 250 at the Tabernacle and also those hundreds, or perhaps thousands, who fell into a great crevice in the earth. And once more Moses and Aaron fell on their faces (this indicates prayer) and pled with God not to destroy what likely amounted to scores of thousands of people. And once more God tells Moses and Aaron to separate themselves away from these people because there WILL be divine retribution.

Why is it that God keeps telling Moses and Aaron to "separate themselves" from the community of those He plans on punishing? Will God wipe away the good people right along with the evil ones? Answer: ABSOLUTELY! Does that shock you or bother you a little bit? Do you believe that? Well I certainly hope you do. We have example after example of it in the Word. The way it works is this: the righteous will be affected by the same outpouring of wrath or natural disaster as the wicked, if they do NOT separate themselves from the wicked.

In Genesis, as messed up in his thinking that Lot had become he was still considered sufficiently righteous as to NOT be counted among the wicked of Sodom. Yet, Lot had to be literally dragged out of the city by two Angels because if he hadn't he would have been destroyed when the city was destroyed by fire from Heaven. Lot's wife didn't separate herself sufficiently from the city (even though she was given that opportunity) and so when she stopped to look back and yearn for what she left behind and was thus turned into a pillar of salt.

When the Lord determined to destroy the Earth in a great flood, He first instructed Noah to build an ark to save his family. The flood was completely indiscriminate; it killed everybody.

Only those who CHOSE to obey God and separate themselves from the wicked escaped.

Back in Egypt God went throughout Egypt and killed all the firstborn of every man and every animal. It didn't matter whether the firstborn were Hebrew, Egyptian, Syrian, Arabian, or whatever. It didn't matter whether this was a good man or an evil man. If you were a firstborn you would die. EXCEPT.....God provided a means for those who trusted Him enough to separate themselves from the national disaster. They had to paint the blood of a Lamb on the doorposts of their homes. And if they did the blood served as a barrier (a dividing line) between them and the others and so they were passed over.

As Believers when we stay attached to the wicked ways and wicked people of this world, we put ourselves at serious risk of being collateral damage when God judges the world. Let me be clear: by "attached" I mean, "identified". That is that we identify with their ways and their thinking; we agree with it. Can you be a Believer and still agree with so much of the ways of the world? You bet you can and we see it every day. But what the Lord is explaining here is NOT that we're supposed to go off and create exclusive Christian communities apart from all other communities; it's that any time and every time we must demonstrate with our actions whether we stand with the world or we stand with the WORD, we must be willing to separate ourselves or risk the divine consequences. And in case you haven't noticed, that is becoming harder and harder thing to do. The more obedient we are the more we get labeled as fanatics and fundamentalists. We're jeered at and told we're just backward and ignorant. But lately we're starting to be looked at as dangerous.....even here in America. We're not tolerant enough. If we speak out against abortion and homosexuality, we're full of hate. If we don't agree with Israel giving up their inheritance to the Palestinians, then we're Zionist whack-o's who threaten world peace.

Will you respond when God calls for you to be separate? Or will you remain identified with all the familiar and comfortable ways of the majority? I implore you to back away from any identification with that which God calls wicked, because at any moment judgment could fall and you could be an innocent bystander.

Next week, we'll watch as judgment falls on the community of those who identified with Korah, Datan, and Aviram.